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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a brief overview of the changing relationship between school and family in Australia. Discussion first concerns major changes that have occurred in Australian families, particularly in the period since World War II. Next explored are the many forms of school and family relationships. These range from informal get-togethers to the formal requirement that parents should have a part in the decision-making processes of schools. A distinction is made between parent participation (in which parents have the right to make decisions regarding the education of their children in partnership with professionals) and parent involvement (in which parents' and teachers' mutual interests in children are interwoven, but there is less concern with power and rights). In subsequent commentary, attention is given to the situation in Victoria, Australia--a state in the process of legislating for closer working relationships between parents and schools through local school councils. Objections to parent participation in the decision-making process and beneficial results of such participation are both specifically discussed. Concluding remarks concern the new role of teachers and schools in communities with active parent participation; in particular, these new roles are discussed in terms of teacher training and liaison with social services and in terms of relationships with children whose parents prefer old patterns of involvement. (CB)

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Gay Ochiltree

Paper presented in Japan, 25-30 October 1983, at the international seminar on *The Educational Role of the Family*, jointly sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) and Japan.

Gay Ochiltree is a Fellow with the Institute of Family Studies.

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There is a close inter-relation between these three programs. The activity of research leads to the demand not only for a storehouse of relevant information (library collection) from which to draw, but also a current index of Australian research on families (data base development) and a method of dissemination of information about IFS activities, projects and research results (publications). The formalisation of these activities through the FIC means that each of these programs has a service orientation, first to IFS research staff and to others outside the Institute such as researchers, teachers, practitioners in the helping professions, members of other governmental institutions or departments and the interested public.

Introduction

The relationship between the family and the formal system of education in Australia is in the process of change. The family's role as the primary educator of the child is at last receiving greater recognition and there is a growing awareness that parents, who have the ultimate responsibility for their children, should have more influence in the way in which their children are educated.

Some Australian States are making significant efforts to cement the relationship between school and family through legislation, while in others few formal changes have occurred. In all States there are examples of schools and parents working together in a variety of ways to good effect through local initiative, regardless of the formal arrangements, but the process of developing a closer working relationship between school and family is far from uniform, and is usually accompanied by some misgivings on the part of those involved — parents, teachers and educational administrators. Children are perhaps the least worried as they deal with parents and teachers almost every day.

This paper gives a brief overview of the changing relationship between school and family in Australia, including a section on major changes which have occurred in Australian families, particularly in the period since World War II. Too often parent involvement in education is discussed with little regard for the fact that families today are in many ways different from those of the past.

The paper also examines the many forms of school and family relationships ranging from informal get-togethers to the formal requirement that parents, as well as professionals, should have a part in the decision-making process of schools. Beare (1984) makes the distinction between parent participation and parent involvement. *Participation* gives parents the right to make decisions regarding the education of their children as partners with professionals; *involvement* is an interweaving of parents' and teachers' mutual interests in the children and is less concerned with power and rights. Parent involvement may come and go as school staff members change and is largely dependent on teacher willingness to allow parents to take a part; parent participation has

more permanence because of the legal requirements for parent representation. However, parent involvement may have more immediate and effective outcomes and develop into a good working relationship.

In the third section of the paper attention is given to the situation in Victoria — a State in the process of legislating for a closer working relationship between parents and schools through local school councils. Parents are no longer present in an advisory capacity only but have equal representation with professionals; they are part of the school's decision-making process including matters of curriculum and policy. Furthermore, parent organisations can also make some impact at State level through representation of parents on the State Board of Education. In this section objections to parent participation in the decision-making process are discussed.

Overall, the major thrust of this paper is to examine the changing relationship between family/parents and the school rather than to address the larger issue of school-community involvement. However, it is sometimes impossible to separate the two and community is included when relevant and necessary.

The Changing Family

Before examining the issue of family and school relationships it is important to consider the sort of families that make up our community in which our children are developing and learning. All too often unquestioned assumptions are made about families which take no account of different family types or of the major social changes affecting families.

Australian families are becoming more diverse in their composition, their ways of living and their cultural background and this means that children are growing up in families with varied values, experiences, internal family processes, and social and economic circumstances. Family life as experienced by the current generation of children has changed considerably from family life as experienced by their grandparents and because of this children coming into the school system now are in many ways different from children even as little as a decade or two ago.

Fertility

Levels of fertility have declined significantly since World War II, from an average 3.18 children per mother in the period 1951-55 to an

average 2.95 in 1971, and 1.94 in 1982 (Institute of Family Studies, 1983a). Children in the smaller families of today have less experience in sharing, in responsibility for younger siblings, or in learning from older siblings. Only children and those with same sex siblings do not have the intimate day-to-day experiences of living with the opposite sex.

Working women

The number of married women in the paid workforce (full-time and part-time) has risen considerably since World War II, from 13 per cent in 1954 to 29 per cent in 1966, and 43 per cent in 1981 (Prosser, 1981). The labour force participation rate for those responsible for pre-school children (mostly women) is 33.6 per cent, although the work is part-time work in many cases (ABS, Child Care Arrangements, 1980). Storer (1981) indicates that migrant women disproportionately make up approximately 39 per cent of the total married female workforce and non-Anglo Saxon migrant women are concentrated in unskilled occupations, as are migrant men.

Many married women work from economic necessity and contribute directly to the support of the family. The Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1975) indicated that the number of families experiencing poverty would more than double if these women were not in the paid workforce (Prosser, 1981).

Divorce and separation

The most controversial change is the increasing rate of marriage breakdown and consequent increase in the number of one-parent families, from 6.7 per cent of families with children in 1966 to 12.7 per cent in 1981. This has occurred increasingly during the 1970s with an accompanying decline in the number of traditional families of head, spouse and children, from 93.3 per cent of all families with children in 1966, to 87.3 per cent in 1981 (Institute of Family Studies, 1983 a and b).

The increase in divorce and separation which took place in Australia in the 1970s had occurred a little earlier in most countries of the Western world, and was not an isolated phenomenon. Although divorce is no longer stigmatised in the way it once was, the increase in marriage breakdown has given rise to fears that the family as the basic unit in society may be collapsing.

The apparent sudden upsurge of divorce in 1976 was not as unexpected as it at first appears. Although most people were unaware of it, there

had been a long-term trend to increased divorce rates in Australia. In the 1920s and 1930s there were about 2000 divorces a year; after World War II the rate rose to about 7000 a year until 1961 when the number of divorces began to climb steadily reaching 13 002 divorces in 1971. Within four years the number of divorces had doubled reaching 24 307 in 1975, the year before the *Family Law Act* came into operation (Jupp, 1980). It is clear from these figures that factors were operating which were increasing the number of divorces well before the new Act. In 1976 when the Family Courts began functioning there was already an existing pattern of a steady annual increase in the number of divorces.

But this is only part of the picture. In addition to the official figures indicating rising divorce rates, there is also a large but unknown number of separations which occur without going through the legal procedures of divorce. In these cases, legal issues (such as maintenance) are handled by local Magistrates Courts or private arrangements are made, and no official statistics are kept.

Children in divorce

A major concern is the increasing number of children who are experiencing the breakdown of their parents' marriage and the eventual separation of their parents. In 1954 there were 8235 children whose parents had divorced (ABS, Demography, 1966); by 1971 the number had increased to 18 451, and in 1976, the first year of the new *Family Law Act*, the number jumped to 73 645 (Institute of Family Studies, 1983a). Table 1 shows that the trend to increased numbers of children involved in divorce has continued but with fewer children than in the peak of 1976.

One-parent families

Divorce figures, however, do not give the true number of children whose parents have separated. The latest estimated figures for Australian children living in one-parent households is 427 000. In almost one third of one-parent households (30.3 per cent) the parents are separated only (ABS, Australian Families, 1982).

When parents separate, whether they divorce or not, many custodial parents receive the Supporting Parent Benefit. Figure 1 shows the tremendous increase in the number of parents receiving this benefit since 1972. These parents, usually mothers, are allowed to earn only a limited amount in addition to the benefit and often live in straitened circumstances which limit their options in life. The Commission of

Table 1 Children of divorce, 1971-82

Year	% cases involving children	Total number of children involved	Total dissolutions
1971	67.5	18451	13002
1972	66.8	22172	15707
1973	67.7	23078	16266
1974	68.3	25505	17744
1975	67.6	34992	24307
1976	62.7	73645	63267
1977	63.7	57878	45150
1978	63.1	51599	40608
1979	61.3	46130	37854
1980	60.6	46836	39258
1981	61.1	49616	41412
1982	61.6	53010	44088

Sources: ABS Divorces Australia 1978, 1982
ABS Social Indicators No. 3

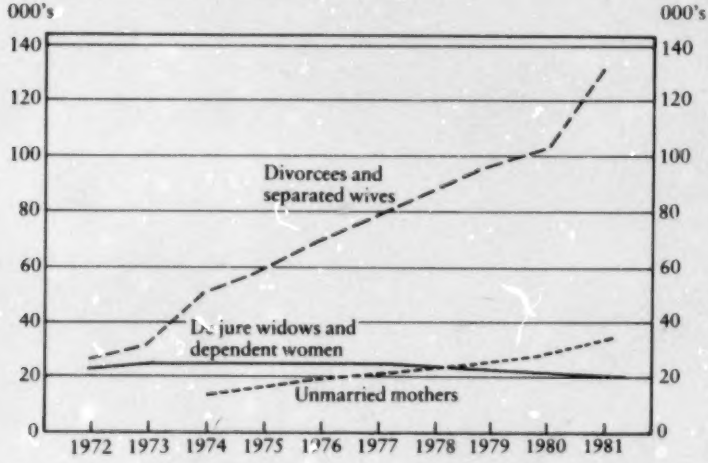
Inquiry into Poverty (1975) indicated that one in every three one-parent families was below the poverty line, and lone mothers had the lowest incomes of all; more recent work by Burbidge (1984) indicates that more than half are now below the poverty line. One-parent families are more likely than two-parent families to be living in private or State rental accommodation; female headed one-parent families are more likely to be renting accommodation than male headed one-parent families; one-parent families are more likely to live in crowded conditions with fewer of the basic household appliances; and mothers in one-parent homes are more likely, if in the workforce, to be working full-time than mothers in two-parent homes (English and others, 1978).

Stepfamilies

Many separated and divorced parents go on to remarry or establish de facto relationships. In 14 per cent of two-parent families, at least one partner has been married before and a little over a quarter of these remarried families (26.6 per cent) have children present from previous marriages (ABS, Australian Families, 1982).

Remarriage in itself is not new and has occurred throughout history, usually because of the death of a marriage partner. What is new is the

Figure 1 Number of class A widow pensioners and women supporting parent beneficiaries, by category, Australia 1972-81



Note: Supporting mothers' benefits were commenced from 3 July 1973, and were renamed supporting parents' benefits and extended to supporting fathers from 10 November 1977.

Source: Department of Social Security *Annual Report* 1980-81

increasing incidence of remarriage after divorce (Shorter, 1976). Remarriage after the death of a partner differs significantly from remarriage or a de facto relationship after divorce or separation because the original marriage partner is still alive and usually has access to the children. Thus, indirectly and sometimes directly, this parent has some influence in the new marriage through his or her relationship with the children (Bowerman and Irish, 1962). Even a parent who no longer visits the child may have some influence because of the child's anger and feelings of rejection resulting from the absent parent's neglect, or from the child's yearning for contact with this absent but living parent (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Remarriages (and stable de facto relationships) after divorce or separation are thus much more complex ventures than remarriages after a death, for both parents and children.

King (1980) argues that there is greater motivation for divorced people to remarry because of the ambiguity of the role and status of the divorced; widows, on the other hand, can expect greater support from the extended family in their clearly defined roles and are less pressured

to remarry. However, because the step-parent role is also ambiguous and ill-defined, remarriages where children are present are more difficult in many ways than first marriages (Fast and Cain, 1965; Visher and Visher, 1978; Cherlin, 1978; Walker and Messinger, 1979; King, 1980; Desmarchelier, 1982).

Ariene Skolnick issues a timely warning to those who see family changes such as divorce as an evil of the late twentieth century.

> Eve. the seemingly clear indicators of family breakdown such as divorce and illegitimacy can be interpreted in different ways. Rising divorce rates tell us little about the level of marital satisfaction or even stability. Changes in official statistics on divorce tell us nothing about unofficial separation, or the proverbial poor man's divorce — desertion. We do know that it is only recently that the rate of marital break up through divorce has approached the level of marital break up through death in previous centuries. There is a good deal of evidence that desertion was widespread in the nineteenth century; by adding desertion to death, we can conclude that a greater proportion of children in the last century must have experienced the disruption of their parents' marriage than children today. Looking at the more recent changes in divorce rate, we cannot conclude that today's marriages are more unhappy than those of the 1950s, 1940s or 1920s. We have no data on the level of marital happiness comparable to national divorce statistics (Skolnick, 1981: 43).

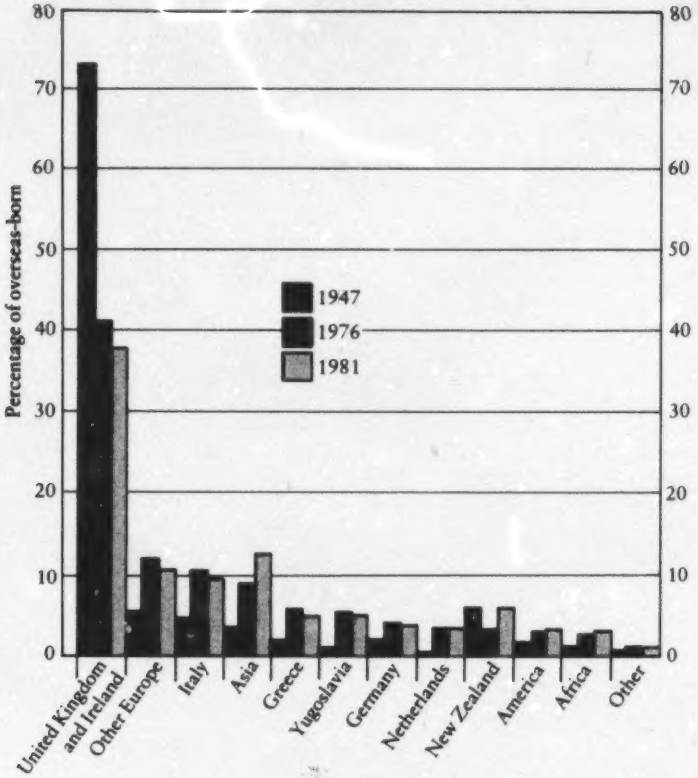
Migrant families

In 1947 Australia was culturally homogeneous with only 9.8 per cent of Australians being of overseas birth and, of those, only 3 per cent of non-British background. However by the time of the 1976 Census, 20 per cent of the population was born overseas; this increases to 39 per cent if those with overseas-born parents are included (Storer, 1981). Figure 2 gives a clear picture of the diversity of the Australian population and the fluctuating patterns of migration from different countries of origin. In a relatively short period of time Australia has become culturally diverse.

Aboriginal families

The position of Aboriginal families in Australia is more complex than that of other families. The arrival of the First Fleet in Australia in 1788 was disastrous for the Aboriginal people. At that time the Aboriginal population was over 300 000 but by 1933 was about 74 000. In the early days of settlement Aboriginal people were slaughtered by the whites and their numbers further decimated by the impact of European diseases such as smallpox and measles. As a result, Aborigines were

Figure 2 Overseas-born by place of birth, 1947, 1976, 1981



Source: ABS Social Indicators No. 3, 1980

perceived as a dying race until the 1920s, and government policy was of assimilation into white ways (Franklin, 1976; Healey and Hassan, 1982).

Aboriginal infant mortality is still three times that of non-Aborigines; about a quarter of Aborigines over 15 years old have never attended school, and the 1976 Census indicated that Aborigines were 13 times more likely than other people to be imprisoned.

The heterogeneity of Aboriginal culture is much greater today. After 200 years of contact with non-Aborigines, especially in the south-

eastern areas of Australia, the Aboriginal population has varying degrees of Aboriginal ancestry, and living patterns range along a continuum from traditional tribal life to families who have lived all their lives in the capital cities. Thus Aboriginal family norms and practices vary greatly (Healey and Hassan, 1982).

There are three major groups of Aborigines — tribal, non-traditional (usually on settlements), and urban. While the greater proportion of the non-tribal Aboriginal population lives in urban centres or small country towns, the 1981 Census shows that about 24.5 per cent of the total Aboriginal population lives in the six State capitals of Australia. Aborigines leading a non-traditional way of life (the largest group) have the problem of balancing two very different cultures. This is particularly difficult when it comes to child rearing (Healey and Hassan, 1982).

The changing social context

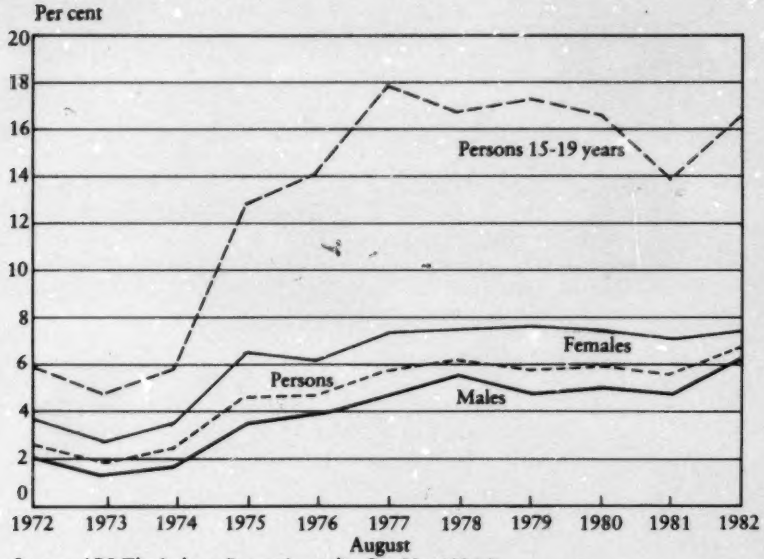
Unemployment

In common with other Western countries, Australia is experiencing high unemployment and increasing technological change which affect both family and school as well as industry. Figure 3 indicates the rapidly increasing pattern of unemployment in Australia with young people between 15 and 19 years being the most affected age group (ABS, Labour Statistics Australia, 1982).

Families with teenage children can no longer expect their children to obtain a job on leaving school. Even tertiary education does not guarantee employment, although the most vulnerable groups are those who leave school at the minimum leaving age of 15 and those who have low levels of literacy. High youth unemployment means that many teenagers who once would have left school early and readily obtained unskilled work now stay on at secondary school. The traditional academic courses at the higher levels of the secondary schools, which are aimed at fitting students for a tertiary education, are not suitable for these young people and this has led to dissatisfaction with curriculum and conflict over content. Alternative courses have appeared, but there is still dissatisfaction and employers demand occupationally oriented courses.

Many families are experiencing unemployment of the family breadwinner as retrenchments occur in commerce and industry. Retrenchments result in more than just loss of income; the unemployed experience stress, anxiety, depression, frustration and alienation and

Figure 3 Unemployed persons, proportion of the civilian labour force, August 1972 to August 1982



Source: ABS *The Labour Force, Australia*, Cat. No. 6204.0

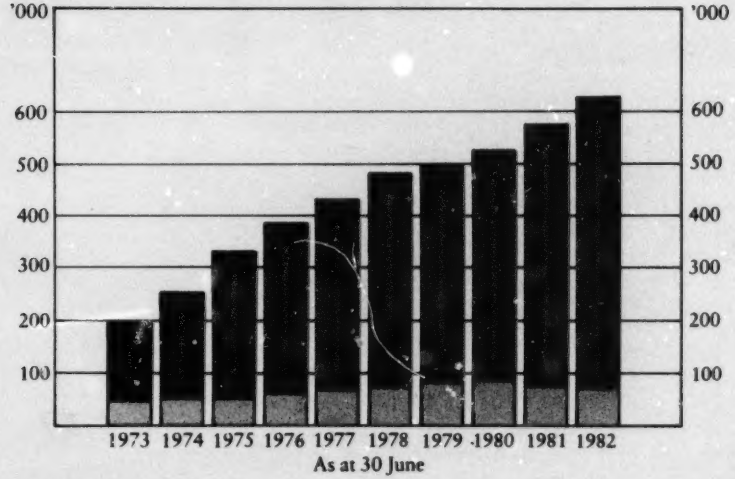
this is compounded for those who see their families suffering. Unemployment Benefits are not enough to keep up all family commitments for food, clothing, housing and any hire purchase obligations.

The number of families with dependent children on benefits of all sorts — sickness, unemployment, supporting parent, age and invalid — has risen tremendously as is shown in Figure 4. Children growing up in households reliant on some form of government pension have limited opportunities because of low income.

Homeless youth

Another problem associated with the recession and unemployment is the growth in the numbers of homeless youth. Accurate figures cannot be given for this transient population, but those providing shelter report increased need. Many of the homeless are quite young teenagers unable to obtain employment and unwilling, for one reason or another, to return home.

Figure 4 Dependent children of pensioners and beneficiaries, Australia, 30 June 1973-82



Source: Department of Social Security Annual Report 1982

The Changing School

Just as families are changing, schools are also changing in response to the altered social environment. Traditionally in Australia, as in many other countries, there has been very little contact between families and schools. The major link has been the child him/herself moving between the home environment and the school environment, learning to adjust to the expectations, attitudes and ways of behaving in the two. Where the child has been able to adjust or has had little adjusting to do because of similarities between the two, he/she has usually succeeded at school. Where the child has not adjusted to differences in expectations he/she may have experienced difficulties or failure. With the increasing h[illegible]ero-

geneity of Australian society the likelihood of discrepancies in expectations, habits and language between home and school has increased.

Schools have been staffed by trained professionals accountable to a central administrative body in each State of Australia; curriculum has been developed centrally and disseminated throughout each State. With its emphasis on academic achievement, the school system has been concerned to impart knowledge and develop skills traditionally thought necessary, particularly for those going on to higher education. Some basic training for occupations was also given. The better scholars have been encouraged to stay at school and progress, if possible, to tertiary education while less academically gifted pupils were encouraged to take jobs or apprenticeships, or to undertake specific job training courses such as those provided by technical or secretarial colleges (Blakers, 1980).

Until the late 1960s migrants, including migrant children, were expected to adopt Australian ways, to give up their own language and speak English, and to adapt to the existing system of education. Migrant children who failed at school were viewed as responsible for their own failure — or their families were viewed as responsible.

This assimilation policy was challenged at the end of the 1960s when service providers, including teachers, realised that migrants were frequently unable to benefit from what was being offered. In order to support the migrant population, changes in the provision of resources in both school and community were introduced, and the policy of integration emerged (Foster, 1981). The current emphasis is on a multicultural community and in some schools bi-lingual programs are provided.

Traditional parent-school contact

What little contact there was between parents and teachers did not intrude on the role of the professionals. Mothers' Clubs existed with the aim of organising canteens and raising money to provide extra resources for schools and Parents' Committees of various types raised funds, provided services (such as working bees on school property), and advised on the spending of funds on resources. Limited numbers of parents were involved as members of these clubs and committees.

Parents visited schools on open days, for sports, plays, fêtes and for parent-teacher interviews (and continue to do so). But they entered schools by invitation rather than by right. The information given to

parents at parent-teacher interviews is still usually limited and often edited; frequently other parents are queueing for their turn and there is little privacy; in many cases parents are discouraged from asking questions which are too probing, the teacher having control of the information flow. However, despite these limitations children feel these parent-teacher meetings are important as it shows the parents care about them (Connell and others, 1982).

Parents and teachers: a changing relationship

Research in the 1960s and early 1970s indicated that opportunity was not equal in Australian schools despite the fact that there was universal provision of education. Success at school and in the job market was found to be closely related to family background (Blakers, 1980). This led, throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, to increasing involvement of parents in schools in a variety of ways, in addition to the traditional contacts already mentioned.

Parent involvement in schools can be seen as a continuum ranging from the traditional relationships already indicated to the current moves for parent participation on school councils which make decisions about crucial aspects of education such as policy and curriculum. As Table 2 shows, at one end of the continuum parents enter the school by invitation only and at the other they have the right to be considered as partners in the joint effort of running the school. On the whole, professionals have the greatest power in the relationship except at the point where parents have a legal right to representation in decision making.

The following sections of this paper describe and give examples of the significant ways of involving parents and teachers in a working relationship within the school:

- parents as teacher aides;
- parent-teacher collaboration;
- formal parent participation in educational decision making.

In each case the benefits and objections to the form of relationship are examined. However, because the types of relationship are described separately does not mean they must exist separately. Some schools may develop several ways of including parents, while others have minimum involvement.

Parents as teacher aides

In a number of schools parents have helped in the school program as teacher aides — sometimes on school excursions, and sometimes by

Table 2 Parent-School Relationships

Parent involvement by invitation	
Social occasions	Concerts Plays Picnics Barbecues Excursions
Educational occasions	Parent-teacher meetings Open days/nights
Parents as advisors or service providers	Mothers' Club School committees/councils Parents and friends
Teacher aides	Making aids Helping on excursions Hearing reading
Parent-teacher collaboration	Working together on joint projects e.g. improving reading/language Developing new courses or ways of organisation Planning
Parent-teacher participation in joint decision making as a right of parents	
School councils	Where parents and teachers together share decisions in regard to curriculum and policy development Parents have a say in choice of school staff

making classroom aids and assisting with certain aspects of teaching such as listening to children read or reading to children. Parents involved in these programs learned about the school more intimately and got to know teachers. In turn, teachers got to know parents and learned about the local community.

Using parents as teacher aides was based more on pragmatism than on theoretical considerations. First, teachers were often overworked, particularly in schools where there was a broad range of abilities in the classroom or large numbers of migrant children with language difficulties. Parents relieved the workload of the teacher and helped provide more support for the children who benefited from the extra individual

Photograph courtesy of the Education Department of Victoria

attention. Second, the presence of parents and other community members helped to break down some of the barriers between home and school and to make schools less isolated and isolating. Nevertheless, many teachers feared the breakdown of these barriers and had reservations about using parents as a resource in this way.

Parent-teacher collaboration

Another form of parent involvement in schools was the use of their services specifically to improve certain aspects of education, such as reading. This is similar to using parents as aides but has a broader underlying philosophy and a more comprehensive approach. In this view, parents are the basic and best teachers of their children and have untapped competence; their influence is the most long lasting as it is based on ongoing contact and knowledge of their children, while teachers' contact is temporary and their influence less profound. In programs involving parent-teacher collaboration attempts are made to incorporate all parents into the program, or as many as possible.

One such collaborative program currently in Victoria is the *La Trobe Parents and Reading Project* involving parents and teachers at a number of primary schools. The program is designed to promote the language and reading competence of children from a variety of home

backgrounds by encouraging parents to listen to their children read. Information sessions provide parents with the opportunity to learn more about reading and education and to enhance child learning. These parents, many of whom are from poorer and working class areas, gain an increased sense of personal efficacy as a result and are more inclined to participate in other aspects of school organisation.

The *Country Education Project* (CEP) in Victoria is another example of collaboration drawing on the existing and often unrecognised resources of parents and other community members. This project aims at breaking down the educational disadvantages of isolation and lack of educational resources, including specialist staff, which exist in rural areas. Don Edgar, one of the original members of the CEP team, outlines the ideas on which this project was based:

> Without ignoring or denigrating the schools whose students were to be the beneficiaries of the CEP, we would look for new ways, work from the outside in, draw on the ideas and services of people not normally regarded as having any expertise in educational matters. . . . We would aim at developing 'cooperative competence'; build on the skills and talents that already existed instead of stressing deficits; get people to work together rather than stress the divide and rule process of individual effort or development; give them decision-making experiences so that when teachers and other leaders leave the district, or when the funds run out, some political know-how is left, some growth in personal and group confidence survives (Edgar, 1979: 63).

The CEP project was introduced in five remote areas of Victoria where it succeeded in identifying and meeting local needs in conjunction with the community.

> In one district, mechanics from local garages, farmers, local people having craft skills and teachers from outlying technical schools will bring technical experience to the students. In another, videotapes and listening posts inform and entertain students on long bus rides to and from school. In a tobacco-growing district increased interaction between Australians and ethnic minority groups is planned and in another, work experience for 400 students is aided by a grant from a local factory. The encouragement of self-reliance and of a positive valuing of the talents present and used in country life makes the approach to the program in Victoria a significant development in Australian education (Schools Commission Report cited by Edgar, 1979:61).

The *Pre-school Correspondence School* in Queensland is a third example of collaboration between parents and teachers. Queensland has many isolated outback areas where it is impossible for childen to attend pre-school, and a way had to be found of achieving the Queensland

Education Department's stated aim of providing a year of pre-school for all four-year-olds.

Traditionally, correspondence schools for older children have relied on the printed word, the radio and parents. Pre-school programs, however, require an even greater commitment on the part of parents. This difficulty is addressed by the Queensland program which, while providing primarily for the child, also supports the parent as a parent and takes into account other family members. Each teacher has about 30 families in his or her care for which personalised programs are provided by corresponding with the parent by letter, the use of cassettes and, if the parent has literacy problems, by using diagrams. Books and toys are sent out regularly from the school library.

At the start of the year photographs are exchanged between teacher and family to assist the interaction and teachers visit each of 'their families' at least once a year (which sometimes involves staying at very remote outback locations). Every so often residential parent-teacher meetings are held at suitable locations with parent accommodation being paid for by the State. Recognising that many modern parents lack confidence, these low-key meetings aim at helping alleviate isolation by sharing information in the joint effort of bringing up children in the outback areas of Australia. The correspondence school encourages the establishment of playgroups where isolated families in particular areas meet on a regular basis; it also publishes a simply written magazine, *Contact*, which aims at keeping families in touch and sharing ideas.

The correspondence school provides a supportive service to parents in recognition that children benefit educationally. It is a unique case of the schooling system meeting parents' needs as well as requiring their assistance — collaboration at its best.

Objections to collaboration between teachers and parents are frequently voiced. The major objection — that parents lack training — can be countered in two ways. First, it can be argued that children learn to talk in their families without parents knowing how to teach them, and that parents influence children's knowledge of school-related topics without necessarily knowing how to 'teach'. Second, expert knowledge can be shared by teachers in basic training sessions and teachers can provide a model for parents (Lawrence, 1976). In addition, parents frequently have other skills and talents which can be utilised in the school program. An objection less frequently heard, but perhaps more important, is that made by Lillian Katz (1982) who argues that children of parents who become too involved in formal teaching can end up with

a parent functioning mainly as a teacher and may therefore miss out on the normal benefits of an accepting and affectionate parent-child relationship. To avoid this criticism parents and other community members should be involved in ways which complement, but do not duplicate the roles of professionals. Parents can contribute help and additional skills and they can provide links with home and community based on a fuller knowlege of their children; these benefits are nullified if the parent becomes a replica of a teacher.

Formal parent participation

The third significant way of involving parents and teachers in a working relationship is formal parent participation. The following section traces the development of this important concept.

Formal Parent Participation in Educational Decision Making

Laying the foundations

In 1973 the new Federal Labor Government appointed the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission to examine the existing situation in both government and non-government schools, to make recommendations in regard to priorities of needs in schools, and to recommend ways of meeting those needs, including financial measures. The Committee's final report, in response to this task, pointed out that the system of education which was suited to an earlier social context was no longer suitable for current conditions.

> There have been many changes in Australian society since public schooling, organised through State Education Departments, was adopted in the late nineteenth century as the means of free universal education. The compromise between government and non-government initiatives and patterns of control which emerged within public systems were a response to particular circumstances and to the balance of contending forces operating in Australia at the time. They may not be equally relevant for all time. . . . The Committee favours less rather than more centralised control over the operation of schools. Responsibility should be devolved as far as possible upon the people involved in the actual task of schooling, in consultation with the parents of the pupils whom they teach and, at senior levels, with the students themselves. Its belief in this grass-roots approach to the control of the schools reflects a conviction that responsibility will be most effectively discharged where the people entrusted with making decisions are also the people responsible for

carrying them out, with an obligation to justify them, and in a position to profit from their experience (Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973: 10).

The Committee also pointed out that if children from all social backgrounds were to have equal life chances, ideas about education must be broadened to '. . . enable schools to forge closer links with other socialising agencies'. According to the Committee, the 'hidden curriculum' of schools meant that children from certain backgrounds are favoured and others suffer discrimination. 'The emphasis on individual achievement in schools may early give those children whose initial advantages are low the conviction that they are poor at school, and such a view of themselves as learners inhibits their prospects of success' (Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973).

Decentralisation of educational administration

In keeping with the Committee's report, decentralisation of educational administration has occurred in most States of Australia with the creation of a number of educational regions. Although central administration bodies continue in existence and still handle staffing matters in State systems, decentralisation has prepared the way for local involvement in schools.

For example, in 1975 the State of Victoria passed legislation designed to give more decision and policy-making power to the individual school. School councils were to have management functions in addition to advisory functions and could have representatives of the school staff in addition to parents and other community representatives. Provision was made for student representation if this was thought appropriate, but schools could retain existing arrangements if it was desired.

However, a study by Fitzgerald and Pettit in 1978 which examined the implementation of these councils in 1000 Victorian schools, found that the inclusion of teachers had led to domination by professionals and that councils were now less representative of the community. In discussing this study Foster (1981) observes:

> The Victorian school council study highlighted the fact that groups located in different parts of the social structure respond differently to educational innovation. The eventual redefinition of the nature and functioning of school councils was shown to depend on the different meanings held by groups involved and their power to impose their meanings. This power was often determined by their access to resources of 'expert' knowledge (Foster, 1981: 243).

In other words, the realities of practice are not always in keeping with the stated intentions of the change.

Parent involvement in decision making (by invitation)

As indicated earlier, Australian parents with children in the State systems of education have had little involvement in decision making within the school system until very recently. Parents on school committees etc. have been able to advise on particular matters such as purchase of resources and provision of equipment but curriculum and policy matters were seen as outside their province. Even teachers had little input as curriculum was centrally developed and school principals made the major decisions in regard to school policy. However, teachers had power in day-to-day decision making in their classrooms and could interpret curriculum to suit their own style of teaching. Parents had full legal responsibility for ensuring their children attended school but few rights within the system.

Pettit (1980), along with others, argued for increased local involvement in the decision-making process of schools.

> The excessive centralism and hierarchical structure of State systems of education has frustrated schools in their attempts to respond to the cultural pluralism of Australian society. There needs to be a move away from extreme centralism towards a more autonomous, flexible, local basis for making educational decisions, especially by parents and teachers, in an attempt to decrease the isolation of the school and lead education towards a more locally-sensitive and culturally-related system of schooling. If schools continue to be the filtering system for life chances in a time of declining and low employment, students, parents and the community will expect to be increasingly involved in determining the functioning and processes of schooling. It is both reasonable and practical for them to be involved at the point where general policy and specific educational strategems are most tangible — the local school (Pettit, 1980:15).

Parent associations worked towards the goal of greater participation and power in school decision making and the gradual movement towards decentralisation of educational administration and regionalisation paved the way. In Victoria, where school-based curriculum development has been encouraged for a number of years, some teachers have had the experience of modifying existing curricula and developing curricula suitable for local circumstances. Teacher experience such as this gives them knowledge which will assist them in working with parents at a local level. But in some States teachers have not had this

opportunity, and not all Victorian schools developed their own curriculum. As Blakers (1980) argues in a paper written for the Australian Council of State School Organisations:

> There are three essential elements in achieving a system and schools which can respond effectively to the needs of students. One is the exercise of full professional responsibility by teachers in schools, involving them in decision making at all levels and offering them opportunity and support to design approaches, curricula and programs for their own students. The second, and complementary one, is the participation by parents and the community generally in the decision making processes not only of the school but at all levels of the education structures. The third is the gradual assumption by students themselves as they progress up the school of genuine responsibilities and participation in school decision making, policies and activities (Blakers, 1980: 69).

Individual schools have had differing degrees of parent involvement ranging from almost none to complete involvement. Swinburne Community School in Victoria, with about 100 to 120 students, has operated since 1973 with a policy of involving parents, students, and teachers in the planning and operation of the school. Planning meetings, which are held once a month (or, in extraordinary circumstances, more often), are open to all. Information is not withheld at any time from parents or students, and rules, policy, and curriculum are developed collaboratively. This school is at one end of the continuum of parent participation in decision making; at the other are the many schools where traditional relationships have continued with parents having little influence.

A more recent example of parent-teacher cooperation in decision making is that of Chandler High School in Victoria. This school is located in an area of growing unemployment and the staff and council, believing that school has a responsibility to the community, made school facilities available. As part of the linking of school and community an alternative Year 10 course was developed; parents were involved in all decisions and open meetings attended by parents, teachers and students were held over the course of the year. Difficulties were experienced in early meetings as groups, initially lacking in confidence, were unsure of what they wanted. (The Chandler experience occurred before formal moves to legislate for parent participation in decision making but was part of the general change in thinking leading up to it).

The Chandler program and its benefits are best described in the following statement made by those involved when criticising a report on the project which they felt did not give the full picture of their experience.

> Over the course of the year a network of parent, teacher, student relationships developed and many activities took place apart from meetings. We feel we achieved something unique and this report does not raise many major issues. For example, the report doesn't show the parental development in self-confidence and political nous. It doesn't mention how our program facilitated the relationships between parents and their children, students and other parents, parents and teachers, parents and parents, and the network of friendships that developed. It doesn't discuss the ongoing nature of the process of participation into 1982. It neglects facts like parents joining in on camps, making suggestions, organising excursions, being part of the school, visiting classes, defending the program and speaking for the program in other venues. It doesn't mention the difficulties of beginning participatory processes — for example, in the early meetings parents didn't know what was wanted of them, and teachers were uncertain how to demonstrate their sincerity about shared responsibility. It neglects to mention that parents often took leave to attend meetings and day-time conferences.
>
> The group agrees that parental participation needs a high priority, but that this is difficult for teachers in the school context with its multitude of pressures. Program participants remain convinced of the absolute necessity for active participation by all involved in the child's education and of the value of the TEAC (Transition Education Advisory Committee) program in working towards this aim. In fact the group is convinced that the school cannot really educate the child without parent participation (Hyde, 1982: 14).

Recent formal moves to involve parents in decision making

The States and Territories of Australia are at various stages of involving parents in the formal system of education. Some are still at the stage of involving parents as service providers, while others are more advanced. For example, the Australian Capital Territory for several years has had parents represented on each local school board and in the Schools Authority which administers education. At secondary level elected students are also represented on school boards. These boards are responsible for making policy decisions on all aspects of school activity including curriculum at the broad level. Budgeting and the handling of financial matters are also part of the school board's responsibility. While school boards in the Australian Capital Territory do not appoint, promote, transfer or dismiss teachers, who are provided under The Commonwealth Teaching Service Act, they do have an important part to play as indicated in this description of their duties:

The board, in determining the educational policies of the school and assessing its needs, including staff, is responsible for:

a. determining the types of teachers required to implement the school's education program and
b approving duty statements for teaching positions for submission to the Authority (ACT Schools Authority, 1981).

In no States or Territories of Australia do parents, school councils or boards have the power to employ or dismiss staff other than ancillary staff such as cleaners. In a very few exceptional schools parents may be involved in the selection and interviewing of staff, but in all cases the central authority retains control of the actual appointment and other matters related to staffing.

So parents on the Australian Capital Territory school boards, which have some say in staffing needs, can be seen as being in quite a powerful position in the Australian educational scene. However, it must be remembered that parents make up only a small proportion of board membership — teachers and the school principal are also on the board and have equal influence. The school board in the Australian Capital Territory delegates decision making to local level, encourages schools to be independent, and parents, teachers and students to work cooperatively. It is required that each board should report in writing on its operations four times a year to all parents, teachers and, in the case of secondary schools, students. In some cases schools arrange planning days for policy issues which involve all parents, teachers and students (secondary school) who wish to attend. Parents and citizens' groups, Mothers' Clubs, and so on, continue to raise funds and work in conjunction with school boards.

A case study: Victoria in the process of change

The Victorian government is concerned to '. . . redress disadvantage or discrimination so that all students are given the opportunity to achieve success' (Fordham, 1983a) and is in the process of formalising and legislating for broader participation (teachers, principals, students, parents, interested community members, administrators) in educational decision making. To facilitate change along these lines the government has provided three avenues.

The first is the School Improvement Plan (Fordham, 1982). This program, backed by a standing committee on which there is a stipulated membership of parents, teachers, principals and administrators, aims to support and assist schools to reflect on and evaluate their practice; to

encourage collaboration between parents, teachers and students; to monitor the progress of this scheme; and to link in with Regional School Improvement Committees and participating schools. This group is involved in working with local schools and regions as a facilitator of change. The second avenue is the State Board of Education which has been set up as an independent Statutory Authority with '. . . the responsibility to enquire into, and publicly report on, the needs of primary and post-primary education in Victoria in both government and non-government schools' (Fordham, 1983b). Membership of the board is from all areas of education including parent groups. The duties of the board are varied but include advising the Minister of Education on matters relating to the operation of the Education Department, proposed changes and long-term planning. The third avenue gives school councils responsibility for deciding educational policies in schools.

> To enable this school-based policy development process to be democratically representative, the legislation will provide for council membership to be shared among the elected representatives of the chief interest groups affected by council policies, that is, parents, teachers, and where appropriate, students. The principal, as the school's chief executive, will be an ex officio voting member of the council (Fordham, 1983c: 6).

The document on school councils points out that there is a difference between policy and operations and that it is the responsibility of staff to put policy into practice.

Objections to parent participation in educational decision making and planning

The release of four ministerial papers on increased parent and community participation in Victorian schools has sparked off debate over the underlying issues with the new provisions being both praised and attacked. There are eight major objections.

1 *Parent influence will lead to a deterioration of educational standards*

2 *Parent influence will hinder educational innovation and foster conservatism*

Superficially these fears appear realistic; on closer scrutiny they are less so. Teachers are equally represented on school councils and able to have their say regarding policy and curriculum matters. If teachers are ad-

equately able to explain their educational viewpoints in an exchange of information rather than a confrontation over ideas, parents will be able to share in the making of decisions on the basis of knowledge and there should be no deterioration in educational standards.

Innovation may be a little more complex. However, if parents are included in the actual process of innovation and change as it is planned, modified and adapted, there should be no more problems than there usually are in such a process. Innovation is always difficult. A key person at such times is the principal who can support staff and facilitate the link between professional teaching staff and the parents. Parents are more likely to fear innovation when they are excluded and do not understand what is going on than they are when they are part of the process. The School Improvement Plan involves parents in both planning and evaluation of programs and should facilitate this process in schools. But through their representatives parents do have greater power to question, and professionals can no longer expect to make changes without consultation. Thus for those who would rather go ahead without the additional effort of including parents, the workload will be greater.

3 *Pressure groups will take advantage of opportunities to be involved in schools to make changes not supported by the majority of parents*

The question of pressure groups gaining power is perhaps more worrying. However, for this to happen other interested parents would have to be excluded in the process of election to school council. If pressure groups do get elected and an extraordinary situation does arise, the teachers and principal are in a position to co-opt extra members of the school community into the council. In any case, a pressure group could not make changes on its own without the cooperation of other council members, so unwanted changes are unlikely; the greatest danger is lack of progress and a series of deadlocks over contentious issues.

If programs exist within the school which involve parents working in partnership with teachers the likelihood of dissenting pressure groups gaining power in school council is unlikely. Involved parents will be aware of the danger and take steps to prevent takeovers. If all (or even most) parents support what is seen by teachers as a pressure group it indicates some discrepancy exists within the school which needs investigation.

4 *The same parents are always involved and are not representative of parents in the school community*

The criticism that the same parents are usually involved and do not represent all parents has a lot of truth to it, as indicated by the preliminary papers for the OECD:CERI seminar on the 'Educational Role of the Family', and experience in Australian Capital Territory schools.

> There is quite a lot of evidence to show that in general parents who stand for election to school boards or councils are 'joiners', that is, people who are interested to join and be active in a number of clubs and organisations. Many parents active in the school Parents' and Citizen's Association have stood for election to boards. There is also a predominance among parents who stand for election of people who have completed secondary or tertiary education, and quite frequently they are or were teachers or academics at universities and colleges. This trend is quite marked in Canberra. It is comparatively unusual for tradespeople, migrants, or parents who have had little education to stand for election to school boards (School and Community Project, no date).

Although the point about higher education does not hold true in communities where the general level of education is low, past evidence indeed shows that only certain parents do become involved. Apart from the 'joiner' aspect mentioned above and borne out also in a British study (Cyster, Clift and Battle, 1979), there are some very good reasons why some parents do not participate. Where both parents work, time is a big factor. Full-time working hours are usually 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and leave very little time to be shared between the household tasks of shopping, cleaning and cooking and the important task of parenting. Single parents who work also have difficulties because they have a double workload at home as they are doing the tasks of two parents. People on very low incomes are unlikely to become involved for many reasons — alienation, possibility of added expense, pride or fear of unsympathetic or patronising attitudes in school staff or other parents. Migrants whose English is poor or who do not understand our system of education are also unlikely to participate unless approached in their own languages or in some other way that bridges the gap — for example, home visits or small meetings in migrant homes for the various ethnic groups represented in the school community. In addition, parents of children in older age groups, particularly at secondary school, are less inclined to become involved because of increasing organisational formality and fears of their own 'educational incompetence' (Cyster, Clift and Battle 1979).

5 *Parent involvement will lead to conflict between school staff and parents*

Fear of conflict between parents and teachers is related to the feelings of inadequacy and of being under threat which exist in both groups. Traditionally, school principals have had the greatest power in decision making but have been accountable to a distant and anonymous central body and more recently, to some extent, to the regions. In some schools teachers themselves have had little part in making decisions about educational issues outside of their classrooms. So the move to local decision making, planning and evaluation is a great shift — philosophically, psychologically and in actual practice. Principals who have managed their schools with little involvement of teachers (let alone parents) are facing major changes. British case studies indicated that parents' concerns and teachers' concerns were rather different (Cyster, Clift and Battle, 1979). Teachers were concerned about the intrusion of amateurs on their teaching role and parents were concerned about whether their children were happy at school and fitted in with their classmates. (It must be pointed out, however, that this was a study of primary schools and that parents of students at secondary level may have additional concerns.)

Schools where teachers have been encouraged to participate in decision making on educational matters and where parents have been involved in a working relationship will experience little change, merely a legitimising of what is in operation already. In other schools where there are the beginnings of a closer working relationship between parents and teachers the process will be speeded up a little by the legislative changes. Teachers in future will be working much more with adults than they have in the past.

Many parents are timid in their approach to schools. They have old feelings of inadequacy or awe arising from childhood experiences at school. This is particularly true of working class and poor parents (Cyster, Clift and Battle, 1979; Connell and others, 1982). These parents will need encouragement to participate in schools, and a genuine welcome. Other parents have plenty of confidence and expect respect but do not know a great deal about education. The onus will be very much on the principal and school staff to cope with differing parental expectation and backgrounds. The establishment of formal structures for involvement in councils and so on does not guarantee success. Working cooperatively is a human activity and involves interpersonal skills needed to cope with conflict and dissent; openness about

fears and difficulties is a part of this and will need cultivation. For many parents and teachers it is the interpersonal relationship which will be the difficulty rather than the educational issues.

6 *Learning to work with parents takes too much time and effort and is not worth the trouble*

Fears that working with parents will add to the workload and take extra time are realistic — local planning and evaluating will require more time out of school hours and developing methods of working together will also be time consuming until patterns are established and misgivings allayed. With the changeover to local responsibility those who prefer dependency on a central administration which takes responsibility for planning, curriculum and evaluation are certain to be unhappy as they are forced into situations they would rather avoid.

7 *Parents do not want the amount of responsibility that has been given to the local school community*

In cases where parents do not wish to accept responsibility it will be difficult to fill all places on the school council and get genuine participation. This occurred in the Australian Capital Territory and necessitated a direct approach to all parents and the establishment of small local clusters of parents to facilitate parental confidence and develop knowledge of local issues. The result was a record number of parents standing for council. Nevertheless, this is a problem which has to be faced when it occurs and the response will depend on circumstances.

8 *Zoning problems*

Where zoning exists students and families are given very little choice of schools. If there is to be genuine school community participation it seems logical that, on the one hand, children should attend the local school; on the other hand, parents need the opportunity to choose the school their children will attend if they do not agree with the educational policy at the local school (Fitzgerald and others, 1977). Community in this situation may be school community rather than local community, although in many cases it will remain local community.

Role of principal and teachers

The school principal has always been the key figure in matters of school policy and organisation. The capacity of principals to cope with and support parents as equal partners in decision making is of paramount importance if the proposed working relationship is to be successful.

> The development of effective community participation in education depends not entirely but very greatly on the willingness of teachers, in particular the principal, to welcome participation and provide opportunities for it; and of all those concerned, the principal is the key figure. His attitudes and policies will largely determine whether parents and the community are welcomed or discouraged. If the latter, he will not find his task too difficult. Parents are already diffident about their capacities and role; they are deterred as readily by lack of welcome as by positive hostility; they are rendered ineffectual by lack of information (Blakers, 1980: 87).

The document, *School councils* (Fordham, 1983c), mentions that the involvement of school communities in the selection process for school principals is under consideration. The now defunct Technical Division of secondary schools has satisfactorily selected school principals on this basis for several years. Such a process if it comes into general operation will help alleviate the problem of principals who are opposed to parent involvement or who are philosophically opposed to the educational policy in a particular school. However, it must be pointed out that the school community means teachers as well as parents; parents are not being given control over selection as some fear. The central authority retains its role in appointments also.

At present teachers in all schools are appointed and selected by the central authority on the basis of qualifications and seniority and, with very few exceptions, the local community has no say whatsoever. This means that teachers may have many different educational philosophies, methods of practice, and organisation. One of the greatest difficulties to be faced at the local level may be to get the professionals to agree or at least to compromise. If there is no compromise it will be very difficult for parents to work with teachers in harmony. Local involvement in selection of school staff or local advice to central authorities on staffing needs (including job profiles) could overcome this difficulty. However, many teachers would fear such moves if they broke down the system of seniority.

Benefits of linking school and family

The aims of parental participation in schools is to harmonise the relationship between school and family, to provide more appropriate forms of education for all children, and to equalise educational opportunities. Underlying this concept is the recognition that the family is the primary teacher of the child.

Where schools and families work together for the good of the child and the child is also consulted, a great deal of power and knowledge is

Photograph courtesy of the *Age*

harnessed which can be used to good effect. Where schools and families remain apart with strictly divided spheres of operation, much knowledge and many skills and resources remain untapped. Power differences between parents and teachers and the existence of negative feelings in both groups may cause difficulties and unhappiness for children as they move between home and school, or even provide children with opportunities to manipulate the two.

Nevertheless, it must be realised that parents and teachers have different roles in regard to children. Parents are more accepting and are concerned with the whole child, including the child's deficiencies; teachers have a more objective relationship and, despite concern with 'individual differences', are interested in achievement. Taylor (1980) points out the pitfalls which may occur at an ideological level when proposing closer cooperation and involvement of parents in schools.

> Many considerations of home-school relationships give too little attention to this aspect of the matter [the differing roles of parents and teachers], being based on the facile assumption that the interest of parent and teacher in the development of the child are the same — or can be made to be so through efficient liaison and communication — and all that stands in the way of complete cooperation in a common endeavour is the existence of certain misunderstanding of purpose and mutual lack of information.
>
> But we must be very careful in assuming that freeing the channels of communication will make it easier for parents and teachers to work together especially if by more intimate contact the discrepancies in value orientations and aspirations of the two roles are more clearly exposed. It is possible, of course, that what we are after is not just better communication and understanding, but some degree of redefinition of the rights and duties of the parties concerned (Taylor, 1980: 5).

Perhaps the most telling words in favour of participation of parents in the system of schooling come from Eileen Lester (1975). Herself an Australian Aborigine, she explains her feelings about education since becoming involved in a project where Aborigines, who have suffered severe discrimination in our society and our schools, are taking control of the education of their children. In the time since her paper was first published there has been a growing trend for Aboriginal people to take control of their own education, each time with success for Aboriginal children and satisfaction for the older generation.

> You as 'whites' have had compulsory school for a hundred years or more, and no more than one in every sixteen of your children succeed in qualifying for a Higher School Certificate or its equivalent. School has been compulsory for Aborigines in New South Wales only since 1938-41. Today's Aboriginal

parents know little about the inside of your schools and their children experience failure, nearly total failure! How long can people be expected to go on facing failure?

In this last four years we have looked afresh at what is going on in the world and we have started to re-think our own and your attitudes towards education. The move that is coming among us, tribal or truncated from our tribal origins, is to develop in our family education some of the processes that you have found useful. Once again we are noticing our babies and being Aboriginal with them; we are also noticing how to awaken the children's perceptions early so that gradually we and they classify and organise our concepts about the world of today. We are expanding our way of education under our own control, so that, still totally Aboriginal and proud of our identity, we are also able to choose selectively with the non-Aboriginal world what we want for ourselves.

We have had a four year taste of controlling our education centres through the family — long enough to begin to realise that we like what we have tried and to see a way ahead. No longer is there darkness or gloom at the weight in numbers of white men suppressing us. With our own voice, able to control our own education, we can see how to be ourselves — Aborigines contributing in the ways we choose in the Australian society (Lester, 1975: 189).

Families and Schools: Disadvantage and Discrimination

While moves towards greater participation of parents and community in school decision making are designed to achieve equality of opportunity for children and the breakdown of barriers between home and school, nowhere is it pointed out the difficulties some families will have in taking advantage of these opportunities. For many families the changes will be meaningless as they face enormous difficulties in providing the basic necessities of life — food, clothes and shelter. Other families, as mentioned earlier, feel threatened by schools and authority, and yet others will have barriers of language and values. Parents in many of these families want the best for their children but avoid the school — not from apathy, but because of an excess workload, or for one of the above reasons. A few may choose to reject the school and what it offers no matter what that may be.

Teachers and parents who work together in schools may not be fully aware of why other parents find it difficult to become involved. If parents and teachers are working to provide a better educational environment for all children it is of the utmost importance that they understand the situation of *all* families and provide for *all* the children without criticism.

At present, teachers learn very little about families in pre-service and in-service training; equally, parents may not be exposed to much information on the life and circumstances of families different from their own. If members of school communities are to share responsibility at the local level with the aim of redressing disadvantage and discrimination so that all students are given an opportunity to achieve success, it is essential that teachers and members of parent groups, school councils and others working in schools have a clear awareness of the differing circumstances and needs of families (as outlined in the first section of this paper). Without this awareness, discrimination will continue and the disadvantaged will suffer as before.

Pre-service courses for teachers should include information about families. What is needed is an inter-disciplinary Family Studies course covering all aspects of family as a part of basic training. In-service programs for teachers and parents on participation and collaboration in schools should include a comprehensive component on families — family changes, family types, family pressures etc. and should also include some follow-up at a later date.

The changing social context puts families under increasing pressure and for many, even those in less extreme circumstances, the emphasis on participation in schools may be an additional burden in an already stressful life; some parents may prefer that schools continue in the traditional manner as it is easier for them.

Teachers and family problems: using outside agencies

At another level, many teachers and school principals are aware that there are changes occurring in families when parents turn to them with their problems. This may occur at enrolment, when discussing a child, or at almost any point of contact between parent and teacher. The British study, *Parental involvement in primary schools* (Cyster, Clift and Battle, 1979), pointed out that a source of great anxiety to members of the teaching profession is the way they see their role expanding to include a large component of counselling for which they are not trained. This anxiety is occurring also in Australian schools and is frequently voiced at teacher gatherings. While a greater understanding of patterns of change and what they mean will assist teachers and principals to understand why parents are turning to them with their worries, teachers should not need to add counselling to their already complex tasks in the school. Where parents have problems outside the educational province (although they may be related) teachers need the support of other

agencies. Within most local communities there are a number of agencies involved in family support and counselling — local council advisory and support centres, marriage guidance centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux, parent education groups, and centres for family planning, home help, child guidance and so on. One way to assist teachers in dealing with family problems is to have a list of referrals to other agencies in their local area or city. This may mean contacting the local council and/or inviting representatives of the various local agencies to visit the school and meet the staff. In many cases outside agencies can provide additional assistance when they are already working with families. While teachers need to develop interpersonal skills in dealing with parents, and to develop tolerance and understanding of changing family patterns of living, they should not have to take on *all* the problems families may have.

Conclusion

The move towards greater parent involvement in education has the potential to benefit all concerned although the transition to a closer working relationship is not an easy one. Participation of parents in a decision making capacity on school councils is part of this process as it gives parents some legal power and the right to be more closely consulted in planning and policy making as it affects their own children. Nevertheless, involvement in a working partnership in the day-to-day business of a school program appears a much more powerful force for improving the lot of *all* children. Where teachers and parents work together with common aims (and often common frustrations) on particular projects — a reading program, an alternative curriculum involving community resources etc. — there is greater likelihood of a working cameraderie emerging. Parents also develop competence and confidence in their own abilities.

However, in all these moves to involve parents in what used to be the teachers' domain, there is still a place for the old informal ways of getting together — concerts, open days, picnics and barbecues. Parents who do not have the time to work on an ongoing program or to regularly attend committee or council meetings may well be able to go to a concert or an open day, occasions which give parents an opportunity to meet one another without the pressure of a working situation. For the many parents who are anxious about their role as parents (and most are), these informal gatherings are less threatening and may provide the avenue for increased involvement at a later date.

Finally, a note of warning comes from the British experience. A review of research on parental involvement in schooling by the National Children's Bureau (Pugh, 1983) makes the point that many schools appear to be trying to change the behaviour of parents to support school aims rather than establishing a dialogue leading to a joint exploration of the contributions of both parents and teachers. Families/parents may have resources, skills and knowledge which will go unnoticed if the school dominates the relationship.

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